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What Works? Research into Practice

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Research Monograph # 11

How can schools support Aboriginal student success?

Integrating Aboriginal Teaching and Values into the Classroom

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Research Tells Us

A number of factors contribute to the academic success of Aboriginal students. These include the following:

- educators who have high expectations and truly care for Aboriginal students
- classroom environments that honour Aboriginal students' culture, language, world view and knowledge
- teaching practices that reflect Aboriginal learning styles (e.g., differentiated instruction and evaluation)
- schools that have strong partnerships with the Aboriginal community

A new body of research is beginning to demonstrate that Aboriginal students' self-esteem is a key factor in their school success. An educational environment that honours the culture, language and world view of the Aboriginal student is critical. Schools need to meaningfully represent and include Aboriginal people's contributions, innovations and inventions. Aboriginal students require a learning environment that honours who they are and where they have come from. These strategies nurture the self-esteem – the positive interconnection between the physical, emotional-mental, intellectual and spiritual realms – of Aboriginal students.

Teaching the Aboriginal Learner: Seven Living Principles

This monograph explores the relationship between Aboriginal students' self-esteem and educational attainment. The key questions that guide this discussion are:

1. What strategies currently work for Aboriginal students, and why are they so important for creating meaningful change?
2. What are the day-to-day implications for educators endeavouring to ensure Aboriginal student needs are met?

The discovery and pursuit of potential answers will occur through examining pre-existing research. The inquiry below proceeds in light of a cultural framework generated by the "living teachings" of the Ojibwe people (see Table 1).

1. Respect

This principle is central to the success of the Aboriginal student; it is crucial that Aboriginal students feel they have a place in our schools and that teachers have high expectations of their potential. This can be achieved by ensuring that our own belief in the Aboriginal student is one of utmost respect. Educators can promote a positive learning experience for Aboriginal students by ensuring that their culture is represented in the classroom. It is also key that these students know that their teachers care about them and have the highest regard for their learning. Respect (in Ojibwe terms) means knowing that we are sacred and that we have a place in this world. This is how we need to foster and support our Aboriginal students.

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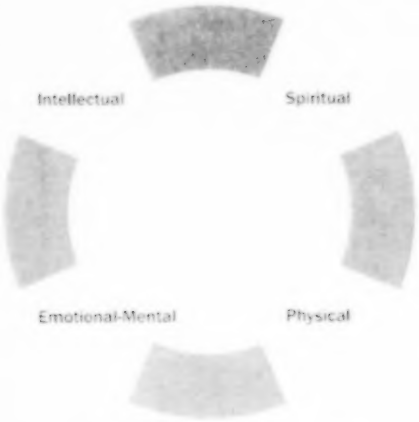
The implications for practice, and what this means for the classroom, can be found in the following applications:

- Aboriginal cultures are celebrated throughout the school program.
- The library has a broad range of Aboriginal books and resources.
- Teachers are encouraged to incorporate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples throughout the curriculum and acknowledge the uniqueness of Aboriginal cultures.
- The Aboriginal territory, on which the school is located, is acknowledged at the door (a welcoming in an Aboriginal language).

These strategies show respect for Aboriginal people and ensure that Aboriginal students feel they are part of the school.

An Aboriginal Model of Self-Esteem



These four interconnected aspects represent "self."

Table 1
Eight Sacred Gifts: Teachings and Implications for Education

Teaching	Implications for Education
Respect	Having high expectations for the Aboriginal student and honouring their culture, language and world view in our schools
Love	Demonstrating our belief (as educators) that all Aboriginal students can and will succeed through our own commitment to their learning-teaching styles
Bravery	Committing to change our school curriculum through including the contributions, innovations and inventions of Aboriginal people
Wisdom	Sharing effective practices in Aboriginal education through ongoing professional development and research that focuses on imbuing equity
Humility	Acknowledging that we need to learn more about the diversity of Aboriginal people and accessing key First Nation resources to enhance that state
Honesty	Accepting that we have much to learn from one another and reviewing the factors involved to encourage change in the education system (increased parental-guardian involvement, teacher education)
Truth	Developing measurable outcomes for Aboriginal student success and using them as key indicators of how inclusive our curriculum and pedagogy really are

Note: The seven sacred teachings are values/principles that are central to the Anishinabek.

2. Love

This principle requires a commitment to supporting Aboriginal students' learning styles. Hilberg and Tharp[3] have identified that Aboriginal students lean towards:

- holistic education (learning from whole to part)
- use of a variety of visual organizers and hands-on manipulatives
- reflective mode of learning (time to complete tasks and answer questions)
- preference for collaborative tasks (group and pair work)

For Aboriginal students, these preferences for learning need to be incorporated in their day-to-day activities.[4] This is how Aboriginal student success can be achieved.

3. Bravery

This principle supports the Aboriginal student by providing opportunities to highlight and celebrate their Nations. The Shki-Mawtch-Ew-Win-En-Mook (Path to New Beginnings) Curriculum Project in northern Ontario is an example of this value in action. This curriculum consists of a series of First Nation units (with resources) that meet the Ministry of Education expectations – a beautiful collection of lessons and activities (kindergarten to Grade 12) that honours the contributions of

Aboriginal people. The units all begin with Aboriginal expectations and are guided by local Elders." The implications for classroom practice include the following:

- draw on key Aboriginal curriculum resources and utilize them in the school
- create partnerships and establish relationships with Aboriginal communities
- highlight Aboriginal peoples by ensuring that their innovations are included
- bring in various Aboriginal resource people to share their knowledge

These approaches are bravery (in Ojibwe terms) in action.

4. Wisdom

The teaching of wisdom reminds us that we are lifelong learners. It also reminds us of the value of sharing and engaging in dialogue with "what we know." This principle reflects that spirit of wisdom and the need for disseminating "what works" for Aboriginal students. This can be achieved through ongoing research and various professional development opportunities. For example, Swanson[9] provides many key strategies that support Aboriginal student success. In particular, her research in a northern Aboriginal community suggests the following four applications for the classroom:

- celebrate individual achievements and cultural backgrounds
- engage the student at a physical, emotional-mental, intellectual and spiritual level
- use a variety of teaching methods with a particular emphasis on holism, visual organizers, kinesthetic opportunities and reflection
- create an environment where humour and "group talk" are accepted

5. Humility

The Ojibwe teaching of humility reminds us to reach out to others for assistance. This is a key tenet in our goal of ensuring that the Aboriginal learner has success. As educators, we need to go beyond ourselves and ask the "Aboriginal experts" key questions. It is crucial that we also go to Aboriginal organizations and communities for direction. This can be achieved by following these suggested strategies:

- work with Aboriginal organizations to collect or purchase curriculum resources
- conduct an inventory of Aboriginal curriculum resources
- organize these curriculum resources into grade-specific categories
- disseminate this information to all school boards in various formats

The key is always to include Aboriginal peoples in any processes regarding Aboriginal children so that their education supports and builds capacity for their Nations.

6. Courage

The 2004 report from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada[10] presents an alarming picture of Aboriginal education:

- There is a 28 year educational gap between First Nations and Canadians (para. 2).
- Educational achievement of Aboriginal students (and the gap between them and their Canadian counterparts) has not changed significantly in the past 10 years (para. 10).
- The school-aged Aboriginal population is growing and is estimated at 40 per cent (compared with 25 per cent for Canadians). A strategy to close the educational gap needs to happen now (para. 32–33).

While this report reflects the situation of students living on-reserve, it is also highly suggestive of the off-reserve population. This is clearly a crisis. The success of the Aboriginal learner depends on real change.

Honesty (in Ojibwe terms) means to "be and get real." It means to proceed in a manner where responsibility and accountability go hand in hand. This is the point

Appreciating the Learning Styles of Aboriginal Students

Holistic — whole picture to parts (concepts)
Collaborate — small group and pair activities
Honouring Aboriginal Student Learning Styles
Visual — hands-on activities and organizers
Reflective — time for tasks and for processing

The success of these strategies depends upon an inclusive classroom.

Strategies for Aboriginal Student Success

Wisdom is Sharing

Celebrate Students: achievements, culture, learning styles

Class Environment: holistic, group talk, humour

Teacher Research: critical ethnography, publish, professional development

Path to New Beginnings Curriculum Project

Produced by Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute, the Rainbow District School Board and the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation.

Available at:
www.thenewpath.ca or www.curriculum.org/secretariat/may24.html

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that we as educators have come to, in regards to Aboriginal education. The learners from these diverse communities deserve and have the right to respect. How do we proceed? Who needs to be included? Where does this change take place? Aboriginal parents and guardians need to be valued. Teacher education programs need to do more to prioritize Aboriginal inclusion.[10] These are definite areas for continued exploration, research and growth.

7. Truth

Truth (in Ojibwe terms) means examining the reality and lived experiences of a situation. It is the process of coming to terms with "how things really are" and developing a plan for change. The success of the Aboriginal learner needs to be measured, and this requires clear outcomes. The success of the Aboriginal learner is clearly an indicator of how committed educators and their respective systems are to equity. We need to ask Aboriginal students and their communities, "How are we performing?" We need to keep a close eye on the educational directions (graduation, retention, career paths) of Aboriginal students to measure school success.[11]

In sum ...

Attention to Aboriginal self-esteem – the connection between the physical, emotional-mental, intellectual and spiritual realms – is paramount. Aboriginal learners and their success are dependent upon educators and schools respecting this view. It requires changes in how we teach our Aboriginal learners. It means that the pedagogy in classrooms must be inclusive of Aboriginal culture, language and world-view.[12] Our Aboriginal students are counting on us today!

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